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Islamization of Knowledge: A Response*

FAZLUR RAHMAN

The subject addressed here is obviously not new to the readership. It has been discussed, written about and, I think, debated in this journal and elsewhere for some time. My aim in the following pages is to give this subject a perspective based upon my own experiences in both Islamic and Western learning.

1. *'Ilm* (Knowledge)

'Ilm (knowledge) is, of course, fundamentally important for man. When Allah (SWT) created 'Ādam (AS), He gave him *'ilm*. So, in the case of man, *'ilm* is as important as *wujūd* (existence). If man had only *wujūd* and no *'ilm*, he would be of little consequence. The Qur'ān tells us that when Allah (SWT) wanted to create 'Ādam (AS), He informed the angels. They, however, did not like the idea. They responded: "Why are you creating this creature on the earth who will sow mischief therein and shed blood? We are here, praising Your Holiness, and exalting Your Glory." In His reply, Allah (SWT) did not deny the charges that the angels brought against 'Ādam (AS), but simply said: "I know what you do not know." Then, after creating 'Ādam (AS), Allah (SWT) brought the angels and 'Ādam (AS) face to face, and asked the angels: "Tell me the names of these things?" It was a test: the original primordial test. The angels replied: "Glory be to You! We do not know; we know what *You* have told us; we do not know anything else." 'Ādam (AS), however, in whom God had put the capacity for creative knowledge, was able to name these things. Thus, man, 'Ādam (AS), possesses a great capacity for knowledge. Neither angels, nor any other creature have this capacity.

But there is another side to this picture. Because of this capacity, i.e., because of the *'aql* (intellect, reason) that Allah (SWT) has deposited in man, he

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can discover knowledge and can go on discovering knowledge, as he has done through the ages. Along with this *'ilm,* man also possesses a sense of responsibility. If we give a sword to a child, he may harm himself unless he possesses a sense of responsibility to accompany his possession of the instrument. The Qur'ān repeatedly states that man has not yet developed a fully adequate sense of responsibility. His cognitive faculties are great, but his faculty of the moral sense of responsibility fails most of the time. This is the meaning I derive from the Qur'ān when it says, towards the end of *Sūrah al-Aḥzāb* (The Confederates):

> We offered Our trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains (i.e., the entire creation), but they refused to bear it and were frightened of it—but man bore it: he is unjust and foolhardy. (33:72)

We see then, that while *'ilm* is there, the sense of responsibility fails. Most of the time when a crucial test comes, man is unable to discharge this trust. Again, in an earlier *surah* in the Qur'ān, it says:

> "Nay! Man has not as yet fulfilled what Allah (SWT) had (primordially) commanded him." (80:23)

It is because of this discrepancy between the power of knowledge which man has, and his failure to live up to the moral responsibility arising from that knowledge, that this problem needs to be addressed.

The question to be posed then, is: how to make man responsible? This is the basic problem that those of us, who entertain this subject, *Islamization of Knowledge,* have in mind. The feeling is that the modern world has been developed and structured upon knowledge which cannot be considered Islamic. Actually, what we should be saying is that the modern world has misused knowledge; that there is nothing wrong with knowledge, but that it has simply been misused. The atom was "split" by scientists of the West but before they ever thought of making electricity from the discovery or to put its uses to other things beneficial, they made the Atom bomb. Now, having made the bombs and having piled them up high, these scientists now frantically seek ways and means to go back and undo them. Likewise, as man has begun to travel in space, his problems on earth remain ever intractable. In sum, while the presence of the desire for novelty and discovery of something new is ever present, the urge to solve problems ethically does not keep pace.

The Qur'ān uses the word *al-'ilm* and its derivatives *('allama, ya'lamūn, 'ālim)* very often. Frequently it opposes this *'ilm* with what it calls *Ẓann* "conjectural." The Makkans, the opponents of the Qur'ān, are portrayed as

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simply working with *ẓann*—they have no sure knowledge *(al-'ilm)*. This *sure* knowledge *(al-'ilm)* is the one given to the Prophet (ṢAAS) through *waḥy*. Such is absolutely and unconditionally *al-'ilm*. Of course the Qur'ān uses *al-'ilm* in speaking about various other kinds of knowledge. It says, for example, that Allah (SWT) taught Dāwūd (AS) how to make coats of mail *(ṣan'ah labūsiṇ)*, and that is also *'ilm*. Even a thing like magic, *siḥr*, which the Qur'ān condemns, is called *'ilm*. Hārūt and Mārūt used to teach *siḥr* to people according to the Qur'ān. That is also a certain kind of *'ilm* although it is bad, i.e., its practice and use are bad. Those people misused siḥr, and thereby separated husbands from their wives. Still it is a kind of *'ilm*. Anything that exposes something new to the mind is *'ilm*. It is not the *'ilm* that is bad, it is the misuse or abuse of it that is bad.

2. Modern Systems of Thought

The modern West has constructed all kinds of systems: philosophical, theological, sociological and scientific. There is much in it that the Qur'ān will accept as its own, while no doubt, there is much that the Qur'ān will reject as well. Let me give one example. The very famous and influential German philosopher Kant developed a system of philosophy which has been extraordinarily influential since the 18th century. Kant says that the absolutely good thing in the world is good will; that is, the desire to do something good, to help someone. This good 'will' or *'Irādah* is the absolutely good thing, because, he says, that when one tries to execute his *'irādah* in the outside world, he has to face all kinds of impediments and meet with all kinds of problems or *'awā'iq*. So what one is able to do or achieve in the outside world cannot be as good as the "will" that is in one's mind.

I am quite sure that Islam will not accept this proposition because Islam teaches and orients man to change things in the world, in the outside world, and for this end, good will is, of course, absolutely necessary. Even if this good will cannot be realized completely in the world, whatever is realizable is good. And it is better than just the good will. This is, I believe, the Islamic position. Let us recall a *ḥadīth* (a tradition): The Prophet (ṢAAS) said that real and true *'Īman* (belief) is that a person, who, when he sees something wrong, changes it with his hands; if he cannot change it with his hands, then he must speak out; and, if he cannot speak out about it, he must dislike it with his heart; but that is the weakest form of *'Īman*. Now for Kant, this will is absolutely good. Views and theories abound in Western literature in all the fields of knowledge. However, I must also acknowledge that there is an abundance of this kind in the Islamic tradition as well.

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In a *khuṭbah* "speech," given in Chicago, I said that from within the Islamic tradition, I could pick out several systems, or several religions, if you like, which will have nothing to do with Islam, with the Qur'ān or the *Sunnah* of the Prophet (ṢAAS). Yet, they all form what we call the Islamic tradition. Ibn Taimiyyah (RAA) reports a statement by the second century Syrian jurist, Al-Awzā'ī (RAA), a younger contemporary of Abū Ḥanīfah (RAA). According to this report, Al-Awzā'ī said that anyone who takes the legislation of alcohol from the *Kūfans*, the legalization of *Mut'ah* "temporary marriage" from certain Makkan *Fuqahā'*, the legalization of drugs from other Makkan *fuqahā'*, and, the legalization of music from the Madinans, he has collected all the evil that he can. All these opinions are there in the Islamic *Fiqh*. As Islam expanded, geographically and intellectually, all kinds of new elements became part of the Islamic tradition. But there are a large number of these traditions which have nothing to do with, indeed, which are contrary to the Qur'ān.

As I have just said, *'ilm*, in itself, is good. It is its misuse or abuse that makes it bad. But this decision of misuse does not depend on knowledge itself. It depends on moral priorities. Certainly, moral decisions yield priorities. If one has atomic power, he should make electricity or isotopes from it for the good of humankind. But if, instead, he makes atomic bombs, that is his decision—to misuse this knowledge.

3. Early Islamic History and Traditions

In early Islamic history, in the third century (after *Hijrah)* and even before there were many ideas and practices that entered into Islam from Iran. When Muslim Arabs conquered the neighbouring countries, they found highly sophisticated Iranian and Byzantine cultures with their traditional attitudes, ideas and practices. Of course, both these empires had exhausted themselves militarily and morally. As a result, the morally fresh and virile power that Islam brought made short work of them. Byzantium, in particular, possessed a great deal of learning: philosophy, science, medicine and literature, etc. The Muslims translated these disciplines into Arabic on a large and systematic scale. They made a decision, however, that they would translate Greek science, philosophy and medicine, but not Greek literature. The reason for this was that Greek literature was full of stories about gods and goddesses. This literature included the great literary and poetic works of Homer and Hesiod, but the Muslims refused to translate them. This was a moral and a religious decision to allow all the Greek science, philosophy and medicine to come into Islam, particularly the last; but not the Greek legends of gods and goddesses that filled Greek literature and popular religion.

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Not long after philosophy entered into Islam, a man of the caliber of Ibn Sīnā constructed a philosophic system. Ibn Sīnā, after Aristotle, was the first thinker to create a comprehensive philosophic system that aimed at explaining everything in the universe including human life in all its aspects. He profoundly influenced both the Muslim and the Western intellectual traditions. He was a systematic thinker; however some of the ideas that he expressed disturbed many Islamic theologians, *al Mutakallimūn,* particularly on subjects bordering between religion and philosophy. Ibn Sīnā undoubtedly tried to synthesize Greek philosophy with Islam. He remained of course, basically faithful to the Greek tradition, but he made every effort, unlike al-Fārābī before him, to accommodate the demands of religion. But, precisely because he had done this, he was attacked by al-Ghazālī (ra) who wrote a book titled *Tahāfut al-falāsifah* (The Incoherence of Philosophers), which actually meant the *Tahāfut* (Incoherence) of Ibn Sīnā, wherein he condemned certain very important propositions of Ibn Sīnā from what he saw contrary to the Islamic perspective. This was an attempt to sift what al-Ghazālī thought to be Islamic from what he thought to be un-Islamic. Later Ibn Rushd replied to al-Ghazālī in a book titled *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* (The Incoherence of Incoherence) and so the dispute continued.

Meanwhile, the Muslim theologians, the *Mutakallimūn,* had started much earlier the formulation of the Islamic creed and a theology to defend that creed. Their speculations revolved around such questions as whether man was free or not; whether man has the *qudrah* (power) to act or not; and, whether the *qadar* of Allah (SWT) had pre-written everything or not. These questions have been discussed for centuries. When the philosophic impact came upon this *kalām* tradition however, we note, after al-Ghazālī, another great scholar, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (RA). The achievement of al-Rāzī in the field of *kalām* is precisely this: while al-Ghazālī had criticized certain propositions of the philosophers like the eternity of the world (that the world was not created in time), al-Rāzī, following the philosophical system of Ibn Sīnā, produced a *Kalām*-system in answer to that system. This was a *kalāmic* answer to a philosophical system: the philosophers discuss problems of *wujūd* and *'ādam* and their characteristics; so does al-Rāzī. Every problem that the philosophers discuss, theologians also discuss. This was, I believe, al-Rāzī's tremendous achievement in *'ilm al-kalām,* namely, to produce a comprehensive *Kalām*-system in answer to the philosophical system.

But al-Rāzī did this as an *Ash'arī.* He believed in the proposition that man has no power to act before he acts. In other words, he has no power to raise his arm before he actually raises it. This is called *al-qudrah al-ḥādithah.* When he actually raises his arm, Allah (SWT) creates a temporary power in him to

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produce that act and then that power becomes non-existent. Likewise fire has no power to burn a piece of cotton; when it is put in contiguity with a piece of cotton, it is Allah (SWT) who creates in the fire a temporary power to burn the cotton. This fire according to this proposition, neither has the power to burn the cotton before, nor afterwards. This is the *Ash'arī* doctrine. We may accept it; we may reject it; we may criticize it. Nevertheless, the *Ash'arī* deny causation. Al-Ghazālī elaborates it at length. Another characteristic of *Ash'arism* is that of atomism *al-juz' alladhī lā yatajazza'*, according to which the world is all made up of atoms. These atoms are brought together in a certain way, structured in a certain way, so that living beings like us come into existence. Then when a person dies, that atomic structure falls apart. Something of that atomic structure, however, remains and then Allah (SWT), on the Day of Judgment, will re-create that body around that nucleus. This is the *Ash'arī* doctrine of resurrection.

The philosophers of course criticize it and reject it. I am not concerned, at this moment, with what we are to accept or to reject. My point is that the question of atomism became so important, that al-Bāqillānī, a great early disciple of the *Ash'arī* school, recommended that every Muslim, just as he/she believes in Allah (SWT), the Books, the *Rusul*, the Angels, and the Last Day, must also believe in atomism. Al-Bāqillānī recommended this because he thought it was so basic, so important, that Muslims ought to legislate that every Muslim believe in atomism. Muslims have said all of these things and held all of these views above. But, let us ask this question: what is therein that is fully Islamic and what is therein that is less Islamic and what is therein that is un-Islamic? Certainly, we are very much concerned with the West because we find ourselves in a situation where we confront the West. But, we must also ask: Can we confront the West and declare what knowledge is good and what is bad and what is appropriate and what is not appropriate without knowing ourselves?

4. Need For Re-examination and Analysis

The first task, I submit to you, indeed the urgent task, is to re-examine the Islamic tradition itself. I would rather call it the *Muslim* tradition, which contains of course, many Islamic things, many un-Islamic things and many that may be on the borderline. This is extremely important. Is Ibn 'Arabī reflective of the Qur'ān? How far is Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's *Ash'arism* in conformity with the Qur'ān? How far is al-Ghazālī's teaching in conformity with the Qur'ān?

We know al-Ghazālī was a great man. He had been an illustrious professor in Baghdad, rolling in gold and glory, when he suddenly resigned his chair of theology and law, and imposed exile upon himself. He became for a time a *Ṣūfi*, spending many years in *Masjids* (mosques) and *zāwiyahs* (small mosques, prayer room). He wrote brilliant and incisive books where he downgraded theology

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and law vis-a-vis spiritualism. Later of course, he rediscovered law and he wrote a very important book, *Kitāb al-Mustaṣfā* on jurisprudence.

If we want to understand Islam from al-Ghazālī, how do we go about it? Was the teaching of theology and law the first phase? Was his second phase more or less Islamic? How about his third phase? He has written a spiritual autobiography titled *Al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* (the Deliverance From Error) in which he tells us that when he became disenchanted with professorship, theology, and law he found before himself four paths from among which he had to choose. The first was the path of the *mutakallimūn,* the second was the path of the philosophers, the third was the path of the *Ismā'īlīs (al-Bāṭiniyyah),* and finally, there was the path of the *Ṣūfis.* Al-Ghazālī goes on to say that the *Ṣūfis* are undoubtedly the best. He said that they have the purest hearts, their actions are motivated with sincerity, and compared to the rest of the three, there is no doubt that they are the model of piety for humanity. Hence, al-Ghazālī chose the *Ṣūfi* path. Ibn Taymiyyah, commenting upon al-Ghazālī's statement, says that it is absolutely correct, that from among these four paths, the path of the *Ṣūfis* is undoubtedly the best, and that despite the fact that there are extremist *Ṣūfi* groups of all sorts espousing strange views and practices, on the whole, the *Ṣūfis* are very pious people, God-fearing, and genuine Muslims. But then, Ibn Taymiyyah goes on to say that there is another path, *a fifth* path, and that is the path of the Qur'ān and the Prophet (*ṢAAS*). He noted that al-Ghazālī had not thought of this path—"*Huwa kāna qalīl al 'ilm bihī*" (and his knowledge of this path was also not much). Ibn Taymiyyah, in my opinion, is thus correct.

We have in al-Ghazālī a truly great Islamic personality, who in youth, blooms forth into a brilliant scholar of Islam; who attains the highest point in intellectual and worldly success and then resigns in the midst of his glory and takes to the *Ṣūfi* path. Yet Ibn Taymiyyah rejects al-Ghazālī's approach to Islam, saying it led him afar from the Qur'ān and the Prophet (ṢAAS). Al-Ghazālī, among his numerous works, has written a book called *Jawahir al-Qur'ān* (The Pearls of Qur'ān). He wrote this book while still a *Ṣūfi.* It is, in its own way, a great work, full of originality, subtle meanings and fine spiritual points. The question, however, is whether he is faithful to the Qur'ān and whether this work reflects the Qur'ānic teaching. The Qur'ān has come to give us a guidance. In the first instance, it guided the activity of the Prophet (ṢAAS) and too, it gives us guidance at whatever juncture we are. But, if we compare al-Ghazālī's *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān* with the Qur'ānic teaching, I doubt that one can come up with the conclusion that this is a book which represents the Qur'ān. It represents an entirely individual piety *(taqwā),* which is totally silent on the community and on the role of Islam in the world. Let me now come to the more contemporary situation.

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When a student from the Muslim world comes to the West, he or she may become enamored by Weber or Durkheim or Kant and he or she may want to study one or more of these thinkers. This is fine. These men, in their own right, were great; they have written about the problems of pure thought called philosophy and they have written about human societies, both ancient and contemporary. Similarly, many of us may be enamored by Islamic personalities and say that if we want the truth, nothing compares with Abū-Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, Imām Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Ibn Sīnā or Ibn 'Arabī or Muḥammad Iqbāl. In all such cases, we are beating about the bush; these are the attitudes and actions of confused people who do not know what to do or whither to go. For some, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī is great. All of these are undoubtedly great men. But if we want guidance, we possess a Book, which we claim Allah (SWT) sent verbatim to his Prophet (ṢAAS) and which actually produced guidance and concrete results in terms of rescuing people from the abyss of the *Jāhiliyyah,* (The State of Ignorance). It gave them guidance and gave them *taqwā.* It made them capable of not only conquering and governing other territories, but also enabled them to guide others. We claim that this book is miraculous. Why do we then not go to that Book?

I would say *'ilm* is all good. *Siḥr* (magic), on the other hand, is bad, but only because it is inherently misused. Why, for example, would anyone want to learn *siḥr* unless he wants to use it? *Siḥr's* very use is its misuse. Nevertheless, *siḥr* is *'ilm;* it has reality. Of course, the Qur'ān does not imply, I think, that *siḥr* can change the *jawāhir al-ashyā'* (the substance of things). I think, according to the Qur'ān, that *siḥr* influences the psychology of people. When the opponents of Mūsā (AS) in Pharoah's court, threw their sticks, the Qur'ān says *"saḥarū a'yun al-nās"* (they cast a magical spell on the eyes of the people), but nothing really changed. Also in the verse about *Hārūt* and *Mārūt,* in *Sūrah al-Baqarah* (the Heifer), those who learnt *siḥr* separated man from wife by psychological manipulation. *Siḥr,* then, does have a psychological reality. Although it does not change the substance of things, it does change psychological attitudes.

5. Conclusion

So far as the problem under consideration—Islamization of Knowledge—is concerned, I, therefore conclude, that we must not get enamored over making maps and charts of how to go about creating Islamic knowledge. Let us invest our time, energy and money in the creation, not of propositions, but minds. Let us recall that Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, was the first thinker to formulate logic. He formulated the theory of syllogism, the *kubrā* (major premise) and the *ṣughrā* (the minor premise) and then the conclusion. He believed that this is how people think; that people conceive in their minds the

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major premise and then the minor premise, and then draw the conclusion. Absolutely nothing of this sort happens in actual reality. Human thought does not behave syllogistically; human thought has its own mode of operation. We still do not know what the nature of human thought process is. Most of the time we do not even know what we want to know unless we are doing some mechanical work. To tell the truth, knowledge is extremely mysterious. Normally, people think knowledge is very easily attained; that one knows what one wants to know and thus attains the knowledge. This is not at all the case. One cannot map knowledge; it is created by Allah (SWT) in the human mind. One can train people for knowledge and then hope for the best.

My plea, therefore, is that we create thinkers, those who have the capacity to think constructively and positively. We cannot lay down rules for them to think. As I have pointed out in the case of Kant; one can certainly criticize and reject propositions that seem to us incompatible with Islamic principles. Also, in the case of Western social science, in sociology, anthropology and psychology, etc., one can always do that, but one can and must also do that with the Muslims thinkers of the past.

I have, then submitted, that unless we have examined our tradition very well, in the light of the Qur'ān, we cannot proceed further with Islamic thought. This is because we must have certain criteria to go by and the criteria must obviously come initially from the Qur'ān. First, we must examine our own Islamic tradition in the light of these criteria and principles and then critically study the body of knowledge created by modernity. We must also remember that knowledge in Islam exists in order to enable us to act, to change the current events in the world. The Qur'ān is an action-oriented book, par excellence. We have to seriously cultivate this procedure and first judge our own tradition as to what is right and what is wrong. Then we must judge the Western tradition. There is no mechanical way of doing this. I cannot sit down and undertake to Islamize Durkheim and Weber; I cannot sit down and mechanically judge what Durkheim said about primitive societies, or what Weber says about this or that form of societies, or what Weber says about this or that form of government. Of course, one can say that certain things are right and that others are wrong but this would not amount to creative knowledge. This would be a mechanical kind of analysis at best. The stage of creative knowledge will come only when we are imbued with the attitude that the Qur'ān wants to inculcate in us. Then we will be able to appreciate and also sit in judgment on both our own tradition and the Western tradition. Even then, however, judgment and criticism is not the end but only the first step in the discovery of new knowledge, which is the true goal of an Islamic intellectual.

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